

The Quality of Slave Labor and Racism

Perhaps the most important technological advance within the agricultural sector of the South after 1800 was in the realm of management, particularly in the development of organizational methods which permitted southern planters to capture the potential benefits of economies of large-scale operation. It must be remembered that the shift from the production of grain and tobacco to cotton, sugar, and rice coincided with a substantial increase in the average size of slaveholdings. The optimal farm size appears to have differed by crop. There is little evidence of economies of scale in grain production; and economies of scale appear to have been fairly limited in tobacco production. Thus, farms located in counties specializing in these crops grew little between 1790 and 1860. On the eve of the Civil War the average size of Virginia slaveholdings was still only 18.8, while the county averages in the alluvial regions of short-staple cotton production ranged as high as one hundred and twenty-five slaves per holding. By the last decade prior to the Civil War the optimal size (minimum size of the most efficient farms) had increased to approximately fifty slaves in the cotton lands of the black belt and to over two hundred slaves in counties of the alluvial lands along the Mississippi. Indeed by the last decade of the slave era, the ability to provide efficient management appears to have become the main constraint on the optimal size of plantations.

One should not leap to the conclusion that this finding supports the stereotype of planters as a class of "idlers" who lacked "steady habits and frugal instincts," and who usually entrusted the primary management of their plantations to inept, cruel overseers while they indulged their taste for

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pleasure in various cities of the South, the North, or of Europe. No doubt such planters existed. But they were a distinct minority. Among moderate-sized holdings (sixteen to fifty slaves) less than one out of every six plantations used a white overseer. On large slaveholdings (over fifty slaves) only one out of every four owners used white overseers. Even on estates with more than one hundred slaves, the proportion with white overseers was just 30 percent, and on many of these the planters were usually in residence.

The continual discussions of problems of plantation management in the agricultural journals of the South were not evidence of the failure of southern planters but of the earnestness with which they approached their tasks. Far from being cavalier fops, the leading planters were, on the whole, a highly self-conscious class of entrepreneurs who generally approached their governmental responsibilities with deliberation and gravity—a manner which accorded with their self-image. They strove to become steeped in the scientific agricultural literature of the day; they organized agricultural societies as a means of disseminating information on the "best practices" in various aspects of farming, and in order to encourage experimentation in animal husbandry, agronomy, horticulture, and related matters; and they established journals in which they could report their findings as well as debate the full range of problems that they encountered in plantation management.

No question was treated with more gravity than that of labor management. Planters recognized that this was the critical issue. Economic success rode or fell with it. No aspect of slave management was considered too trivial to be omitted from consideration or debate. Details of housing, diet, medical care, marriage, child rearing, holidays, incentives and punishments, alternative methods of organizing field labor, the duties of managerial personnel, and even the manner or air to be assumed by a planter in his relationship with his slaves were all deemed worthy of debate. Discussions of diet included such matters as the balance between meat, vegetables, grains, and dairy products, the virtues of fat versus lean meats, and the optimum method of food distribution and preparation. With respect to housing, planters debated the respective merits of single- and multi-family dwellings, the benefits and costs of various types of building materials, the design of chimneys, and the optimum spatial distribution of slave houses and other buildings. On marriage and the family, the debate included such issues as whether or not slaves should be permitted to marry across plantations, and the latitude to be allowed to drivers and overseers in the mediation of intra- as well as interfamily disputes. Debates around the incentive structure turned on such matters as the relative advantages of gifts or cash bonuses versus allotments of plots of land, the types of crops that slaves could grow on their individual plots, whether or not slaves should be permitted to have quasi-property rights in the small livestock, and whether slaves should be permitted to market their own crops and livestock or should be required to sell them to the planter at prevailing market prices.

Whatever the differences among planters in the resolution of these par-

ticular issues, there was widespread agreement that the ultimate objective of slave management was the creation of a highly disciplined, highly specialized, and well-coordinated labor force. Specialization and interdependence were the hallmarks of the medium- and large-sized plantations. On family-sized farms, each worker had to fulfill a multiplicity of duties according to a pace and pattern which were quite flexible and largely independent of the activities of others. On plantations, the hands were as rigidly organized as in a factory. Each hand was assigned to a set of tasks which occupied him throughout the year, or at least through particular seasons of the year. There were drivers, plowmen, hoe hands, harrowers, seed sowers, coverers, sorters, ginners, packers, milkmaids, stock minders, carpenters, blacksmiths, nurses, and cooks—to give only a partial listing.

With respect to field labor, the various hands were formed into gangs or teams in which the interdependence of labor was a crucial element. During the planting period the interdependence arose largely from within each gang. A planting gang consisted of five types of hands who followed one another in a fixed procession. Leading off the procession were plowmen who ridged up the unbroken earth; then came harrowers who broke up the clods; then drillers who created the holes to receive the seeds, each hole a prescribed distance apart from the next one; then droppers who planted the seeds in the holes; and finally rakers who covered up the holes. The intensity of the pace of these gangs was maintained in three ways:

First, by choosing as the plowmen and harrowers who led off the planting operation the strongest and ablest hands.

Second, by the interdependence of each type of hand on the other. (For as on an assembly line, this interdependence generated a pressure on all those who worked in the gang to keep up with the pace of the leaders.)

Third, by assigning drivers or foremen who exhorted the leaders, threatened the laggards, and did whatever was necessary to ensure both the pace and the quality of each gang's labor.

During the period of cultivation, this interdependence, and the productive tension which it created, stemmed to a considerable extent from the interaction between gangs. Field hands were divided into two groups: the hoe gang and the plow gang. The hoe hands chopped out the weeds which surrounded the cotton plants as well as excessive sprouts of cotton plants. The plow gangs followed behind, stirring the soil near the rows of cotton plants and tossing it back around the plants. Thus the hoe and plow gangs each put the other under an assembly-line type of pressure. The hoeing had to be completed in time to permit the plow hands to carry out their tasks. At the same time the progress of the hoeing, which entailed lighter labor than plowing, set a pace for the plow gang. The drivers or overseers moved back and forth between the two gangs, exhorting and prodding each to keep up with the pace of the other, as well as inspecting the quality of the work.

This feature of plantation life—the organization of slaves into highly disciplined, interdependent teams capable of maintaining a steady and intense rhythm of work—appears to be the crux of the superior efficiency of large-scale operations on plantations, at least as far as fieldwork was concerned. It is certainly the factor which slaveowners themselves frequently singled out as the key to the superiority of the plantation system of organization. Although Olmsted repeatedly reported that planters preferred slave labor to white labor because slaves "could be driven," the significance of these statements completely eluded him. White men, said one planter, "are not used to steady labour; they work reluctantly, and will not bear driving; they cannot be worked to advantage with slaves, and it is inconvenient to look after them, if you work them separately." A slaveholder who listened to Olmsted's report of his conversation with Griscom, the Northerner who claimed that slave laborers produced only one fourth as much output per day as northern laborers, responded that these slaves "could not have been well 'driven.'" Another reported that "he would never have white people at ordinary work, because he couldn't drive them." Still another said: "You never could depend on white men, and you couldn't drive them any; they wouldn't stand it. Slaves were the only reliable laborers. . . ." The conclusion that Olmsted drew from such reports was not that slave labor in the plantation context was of a superior quality, but that southern free laborers must have been extremely lazy, inept, and of low quality compared to northern laborers.

Even on those few occasions when Olmsted actually witnessed gangs working in the field, he failed to appreciate the significance of slave teamwork, coordination, and intensity of effort, although he faithfully recorded these features of their work. The hoe gang, he reported on one of these instances, "numbered nearly two hundred hands (for the force of two plantations was working together), moving across the field in parallel lines, with a considerable degree of precision. I repeatedly rode through the lines at a canter, with other horsemen, often coming upon them suddenly, without producing the smallest change or interruption in the dogged action of the labourers, or causing one of them, so far as I could see, to lift an eye from the ground." What conclusion did Olmsted draw from this experience? Did he view it as a remarkable demonstration of the teamwork of black laborers and of the intensity of their concentration on the task at hand? The "stupid, plodding, machine-like manner in which they labour," said Olmsted, "is painful to witness." While Olmsted was willing to concede that these slave hands probably worked "harder, and more unremittingly," than northern laborers, he still doubted that "they accomplish as much in the same time as agricultural labourers at the North usually do."

Harvest operations in cotton do not appear to have offered the opportunities for division of labor and specialization that existed during the planting and cultivation seasons (although such opportunities do appear to have existed in sugar harvesting). In the absence of an interdependence that could

be exploited to promote an intense rhythm of work, planters attempted to achieve the same objective by dividing harvest hands into competing groups. There were daily as well as weekly races, with prizes (bonuses) offered to the winning team and to the leading individual picker. There were daily weigh-ins of the cotton picked, and those who did not respond to the positive incentive had to face the abuse, verbal or physical, of the driver, if they fell too far below the expected pace.

The so-called "task method" was still another means of promoting the intensity of labor during the harvest season. Under this method, slaves were assigned given plots of land which were to be picked each day. Intensity of labor was promoted by permitting the slave to use his time for his own purposes when the task was completed. One way of ensuring that the work was done well under this system was to reassign the same plot to the same slave in each of the successive rounds of picking. Daily weighing of cotton also served as a check on performance.

Specialization and division of labor were not limited to fieldwork. They carried over into domestic aspects of plantation life. Certain domestic tasks were socialized to a considerable extent. This was true of child rearing and, to a lesser extent, of the production of clothing and of cooking. It was women, predominantly, who specialized in these employments. Most large plantations maintained nurseries. These were supervised by one or more of the older women, depending on the size of the plantation, who generally were assisted by older children. Women who worked in the fields, or at other assignments, deposited their children in the morning and picked them up in the evening. Nursing mothers returned to the nursery three or four times per day for feedings.

The production of clothing was, in varying degrees, carried out on most plantations. Some had loom houses in which most of the cloth consumed on plantations was woven. Others limited production to the sewing of purchased cloth. Sometimes these tasks were carried out by women in their own houses, when the weather was inclement or during slack seasons. In other cases, a permanent staff was assigned to a special building. Olmsted described the loom-house staff on one very large plantation. Of the dozen hands so employed, one "was insane, and most of the others were crippled, invalids with chronic complaints, or unfitted by age, or some infirmity, for field work."

Olmsted's description points to another aspect of the efficiency of plantations—the extraordinarily high labor-force participation rate (share of the population in the labor force). In the free economy—North and South—approximately one third of the population was in the labor force. Among slaves, the labor-force participation rate was two thirds. Virtually every slave capable of being in the labor force was in it. This was due largely to the inability of slaves, particularly women and children, to choose leisure, education, or work at home, if they preferred it, to work in fields or other assigned tasks. It was partly due to institutional arrangements which permitted plantations to find methods of employing those who would, to a large extent, be

unemployable in free societies, particularly in free urban societies—the mentally retarded, the crippled, the aged.

Plantations not only brought a larger share of the population into the labor force, but they were also able to move closer to "full-capacity" utilization of the labor potential than was true of the free economy. This was not because slaves worked more hours per day or more days per week than free farmers. The best available evidence is that both slaves and free farmers averaged approximately 70–75 hours of work per week during the peak labor periods of planting, cultivation, and harvesting. Nor does it appear that slaves worked more days per year. In addition to having Sundays off, slaves had all or part of half of their Saturdays free, most of these being concentrated in the off-peak periods of farming. There was also up to a week or so of additional holidays, some at predesignated times, as during Christmas or in the interstice between the end of cultivation and the beginning of the harvest, some as unscheduled rewards for work well done. About a dozen days per year were lost due to illness. Thus the work year appears to have consisted of roughly 265–275 days.

The higher rate of the utilization of labor capacity was partly due to what was, by the usual standards of farmers, an extraordinary intensity of labor. Far from being "ordinary peasants" unused to "pre-industrial rhythms of work," black plantation agriculturalists labored under a regimen that was more like a modern assembly line than was true of the routine in many of the factories of the antebellum era. It was often easier for factory workers to regulate the pace of machines to their accustomed rhythm than for slaves to regulate the pace set by drivers. For much of antebellum manufacturing was still operated on the work patterns of the handicrafts. Division of labor was still at relatively low levels and interdependence of operations was still limited. Just as the great plantations were the first large, scientifically managed business enterprises, and as planters were the first group to engage in large-scale, scientific personnel management, so, too, black slaves were the first group of workers to be trained in the work rhythms which later became characteristic of industrial society. It was not the slaves but men like Olmsted who retained a "pre-industrial peasant mentality," who viewed the teamwork, coordination, and intensity of effort achieved by black field hands as "stupid, plodding, machine-like," and "painful to witness." While Olmsted's revision is quite understandable, he was nevertheless wrong in concluding that the gang system was inefficient, and his belittling of the quality of slave labor was unwarranted.

The large slave plantations were about 34 percent more efficient than free southern farms. This advantage was not due to some special way in which land or machinery was used, but to the special quality of plantation labor. It is true that large plantations used more land and equipment (by value) per worker than small plantations. However, this feature was taken into account in computing the efficiency indexes. In other words, even after one adjusts for the fact that on large plantations slaves generally worked on

better land than free southern farmers and had more equipment, large plantations were still some 34 percent more efficient than free farms.

The advantage of plantations, at least that part which has been measured thus far, was due to the combination of the superior management of planters and the superior quality of black labor. In a certain sense, all, or nearly all, of the advantage is attributable to the high quality of slave labor, for the main thrust of management was directed at improving the quality of labor. How much of the success of this effort was due to the management, and how much to the responsiveness of the workers is an imperative question, but its resolution lies beyond the range of current techniques and available data.

Whatever the contribution of management, however, it should not all be assigned to white planters and overseers. For blacks—though slaves, though severely limited in the extent to which they could climb the economic ladder of antebellum society—were a vital part of the management of plantations and, in this capacity, of the economic success of the plantation.

Slaves entered into plantation management at two levels. As drivers or gang foremen they were ubiquitous on medium and large plantations. In the fields the drivers were responsible for ensuring that each gang achieved its daily objectives and, if the gang was operating on the task system, for determining the daily tasks of particular hands. Gang objectives were sometimes established either by the plantation owner or overseer. In other instances the establishment of these objectives was left to the discretion of the drivers.

Slaves also operated at the highest level of plantation supervision, short of actual ownership, as overseers or general managers. When acting as overseers, slaves were responsible not only for the overall direction of the labor force but for various entrepreneurial decisions, including the scheduling of the particular field operations and the purchasing of supplies. In such cases the burden of the success or failure of the entire production side of plantation operations rested on these slaves. Much of the attention of owners was directed to the commercial aspects of operations—the marketing of the crops, the purchase of equipment, the acquisition of new lands, the construction of new buildings, the negotiation of loans—or to other nonagricultural enterprises in which they were engaged.

Various scholars have recognized that slaves sometimes acted as overseers or general managers. But it has been assumed that this was rare, that on most large plantations the general management of production was in the hands of white overseers. The white overseer is assumed to have been a ubiquitous figure, present on virtually all plantations of one hundred or more slaves and on the majority of those with fifty to one hundred slaves. As pointed out previously, data in the census manuscripts clearly invalidates this assumption. Only 30 percent of plantations with one hundred or more slaves employed white overseers. On smaller plantations the proportion was even lower.

It might be thought that on many of the large plantations sons of planters took over the functions of the overseer. The data in the manuscript schedules of the census rules this possibility out in most cases. Among large plantations without overseers, 61 percent had only one adult male over age nineteen in the planter's family. In these cases the planter was the only adult male in his family who was in residence, or else the father was absent or dead and his only resident son was running the plantation. In any event there was no second male family member to take up the duties of the overseer. On 6 percent of the large plantations there were two adults over age nineteen, but the second of these persons was at least seventy years of age, and hence was probably too old to be actively involved in the business affairs of the plantation. Another 9 percent of the plantations had no male at all over age nineteen in residence. Thus, for 75 percent of the plantations without overseers there were no sons or other males who could have assumed the duties of the overseer. The conclusion indicated by these findings is startling: On a majority of the large plantations, the top nonownership management was black.

The question that begs to be explained is how so many scholars could have been so badly misled on this issue? Part of the explanation turns on a methodological consideration. To a considerable extent, the views of historians regarding the nature of plantation management are based on inferences from correspondence between owners and overseers. However, such correspondence (including instructions to overseers) was most likely to arise when owners did not reside on their plantations. Thus, previous historians based their conclusions on a biased sample of evidence, on a relatively small group of plantations which were unrepresentative of the whole. It is probable that absentee owners relied on white overseers to a much greater extent than did resident owners, among other reasons, because laws made it illegal to leave slaves exclusively under their own supervision.

Part of the explanation also turns on the way in which many historians have accepted the arguments of the authors of the economic indictment of slavery. One would hardly expect a system in which even the masters were cavalier fops and idlers to produce a high-quality class of slave managers. Nor was a mass of blacks "incapable of all but the rudest forms of labour," "evasive," incapable of maintaining "a steady routine," "incorrigibly indolent," "wanting in versatility," and unsuited for any activity that requires "the slightest care, forethought, or dexterity" likely to throw up any considerable number of able managers. If one accepts the premise that the system crushed all opportunity for the personal and intellectual development of slaves, mere consistency requires one also to expect to find that slaves were debarded from virtually all positions of responsibility.

Interestingly enough, Olmsted did not show such consistency of mind. Despite his low opinion of the quality of the black masses, he had a high opinion of the quality of blacks who functioned as drivers.

In the selection of drivers, regard seems to be had to size and strength—at least.

nearly all the drivers I have seen are tall and strong men—but a great deal of judgment, requiring greater capacity of mind than the ordinary slave is often supposed to be possessed of, is certainly needed in them. A good driver is very valuable and usually holds office for life. His authority is not limited to the direction of labour in the field, but extends to the general deportment of the negroes. He is made to do the duties of policeman, and even of police magistrate. It is his duty, for instance, on Mr. X's estate, to keep order in the settlement; and, if two persons, men or women, are fighting, it is his duty to immediately separate them, and then to "whip them both."

Before any field of work is entered upon by a gang, the driver who is to superintend them has to measure and stake off the tasks. To do this at all accurately, in irregular-shaped fields, must require considerable powers of calculation. A driver with a boy to set the stakes, I was told, would accurately lay out forty acres a day, in half-acre tasks. The only instrument used is a five-foot measuring rod. When the gang comes to the field, he points out to each person his or her duty for the day, and then walks about among them, looking out that each proceeds properly. If, after a hard day's labour, he sees that the gang has been overtasked, owing to a miscalculation of the difficulty of the work, he may excuse the completion of the tasks; but he is not allowed to extend them. In the case of uncompleted tasks, the body of the gang begin new tasks the next day, and only a sufficient number are detailed from it to complete, during the day, the unfinished tasks of the day before. The relation of the driver to the working hands seems to be similar to that of the boatswain to the seamen in the navy, or of the sergeant to the privates in the army.

Having generally had long experience on the plantation, the advice of the drivers is commonly taken in nearly all the administration, and frequently they are, de facto, the managers. Orders on important points of the plantation economy, I have heard given by the proprietor directly to them, without the overseer's being consulted or informed of them; and it is often left with them to decide when and how long to flow the rice-grounds—the proprietor and overseer deferring to their more experienced judgment. Where the drivers are discrete, experienced, and trusty, the overseer is frequently employed merely as a matter of form, to comply with the laws requiring the superintendence or presence of a white man among every body of slaves; and his duty is rather to inspect and report than to govern. Mr. X considers his overseer an uncommonly efficient and faithful one, but he would not employ him, even during the summer, when he is absent for several months, if the law did not require it. He has sometimes left his plantation in care of one of the drivers for a considerable length of time, after having discharged an overseer; and he thinks it has then been quite as well conducted as ever. His overseer consults the drivers on all important points, and is governed by their advice.

"Mr. X" was not the only planter who frequently consulted with his slave managers and who deferred to their judgment, or insisted that his overseers do so. Nor was Olmsted the only one to note the high quality of black managers. When McBride, the owner of the Hickory Hill plantation, left on a long trip, he wrote detailed instructions to his overseer on the method of planting and cultivating various crops. In the case of rice, however, McBride said he was too ill-informed on that crop to offer advice and suggested that

the overseer consult the driver who was "an old rice planter." Similarly, Charles Manigault instructed his overseer to "be careful not to interfere too much with the beating and management of the Rice Mill" since "the Negroes in charge have much experience therein." Indirect testimony of the high regard which planters had for the intelligence and good judgment of their slave drivers and other lower echelon personnel comes from the frequent complaints of white overseers that direct consultations between planters and drivers or other respected slaves were undermining their authority. No doubt some drivers deliberately provoked tests of strength between themselves and the overseers. In many such instances they were successful, and the overseer was fired or left of his own volition. On many of those plantations which did make use of white overseers, the turnover rate of overseers was quite high.

That the quality of slaves, both as ordinary workers and as managers, could have been so completely misrepresented by the antebellum critics of slavery is testimony to the extent of their racist myopia. What bitter irony it is that the false stereotype of black labor, a stereotype which still plagues blacks today, was fashioned not primarily by the oppressors who strove to keep their chattel wrapped in the chains of bondage, but by the most ardent opponents of slavery, by those who worked most diligently to destroy the chains of bondage.

While keenly aware of the torment which these false stereotypes of incompetence have helped to impose on blacks for more than a century, we are, as social scientists, impressed by this exceptional demonstration of the power of ideology to obliterate reality, and we view it as an unparalleled opportunity to investigate the complex interrelationships between ideas and the material circumstances of life. What is at issue here is not only how these false stereotypes regarding blacks came into being, but how they could have persisted for so long. Resolution of the first issue involves consideration of the intricate ways in which variations of racist viewpoints among critics and defenders of slavery, among northern and southern whites—for with very few exceptions they were all racists—interacted with each other to create an almost indestructible image of black incompetence. Resolution of the second issue involves consideration of why it has been so difficult for the many historians and social scientists who have studied slave society to penetrate this image and to discover the reality which it hid.

Much as we desire to do so, we cannot settle these issues—not merely because they lie beyond the scope of this book, or even because they require skills which go beyond our special areas of expertise, but because much research is still required before the various aspects of these questions can be treated adequately. Nevertheless, we cannot resist the opportunity to suggest some considerations which we believe ought to enter into the ultimate resolution.

One point on which there can be little doubt is that the belief in Negro incompetence was given a powerful fillip by the racial theories that came into

prominence during the first half of the nineteenth century. These theories were embraced by Northerners as well as Southerners, by critics of slavery as well as its defenders. The theories asserted that blacks and whites were of different species or at least that blacks were an "inferior variety" of the human species. The African origins of blacks were thought to have contributed to the biological defects. Some attributed the racial differences to geographic factors. Thus, Negroes had "a dull torpid brain," a feature thought to be characteristic of "inhabitants of the warmer climates." Others saw Negro backwardness as being rooted in their savage ancestry. Whatever the cause, the innate inferiority of the Negro race was said to manifest itself in laziness, limited intellectual capacity, a childlike simplicity, docility, sensuousness, and tempestuousness. It is important to stress that these racist views were not embraced merely in popular thought. They were the reigning tenets of mid-nineteenth-century anthropology, in Europe as well as in the United States.

Although both critics and defenders of slavery believed in the innate inferiority of Negroes, there were important differences between them in assessing the effect of slavery on the natural endowments of Negroes. Critics of slavery believed that bondage had not only retarded the development of blacks but had exacerbated the baser features of their nature. Slavery had encouraged blacks to be slovenly, to prefer indolence to industry, to be evasive, to lie, and to steal. Abolitionists believed that slavery retarded black development because it was incapable of recognizing individual accomplishment and rewarding it, because it relied on the lash to elicit effort, thus identifying labor with pain. They also believed that the plantation form of organization kept blacks relatively isolated from contacts with whites and hindered their capacity to assimilate the higher white culture. Hence they drew a distinction between house servants and field hands, assuming the former were more highly developed intellectually and culturally because of their more intimate association with whites.

Defenders of slavery argued that their system not only had a beneficial development on blacks but was, indeed, pushing them to the outer limits of their capacity. Despite the fact that they were of an inferior race, under the slave system of labor organization blacks were induced to work harder and produce more than white labor. Not only was the natural indolence of blacks thus thwarted, but the most talented of their number were trained in the handicrafts and in other higher arts, thus achieving a status under slavery which was not only "elevated from the condition in which God first created them" but was clearly more lofty than anything that might be obtained under freedom. For everybody knew that slave labor was "vastly more efficient and productive than the labor of free blacks."

Obviously a debate cast along the lines just described could only serve to reinforce the stereotype of Negro incompetence. For neither side ever called the alleged natural incompetence of the Negro into question. Quite the contrary—each new round of debate served to raise the proposition of

natural incompetence to the status of an axiomatic truth. Critics of slavery emphasized the failings of southern production, attributing these to a system which was not only based on an inferior variety of human labor but which degraded all labor, reducing in quality not only the effort of blacks but of whites as well. Defenders of slavery attributed outstanding accomplishments in production not to the high quality of black labor but to the success of the system of slavery which enabled the South to achieve as much as it did from what was basically inferior human material.

That Olmsted fully accepted the racial views of his day is clearly evident in his books. The Germans appear as the only whites in the South capable of resisting the degrading effects of slavery on white labor. They are invariably portrayed as industrious and efficient—the very models of enterprising, thrifty, and ambitious small proprietors. On the other hand, the only Jews that Olmsted encountered in the South were moneylenders "of no character" who charged extortionate interest rates ("often . . . not less than 25 percent per annum"), who lived in squalid homes, and who engaged "in an unlawful trade with the simple negroes." Similarly, the Irish were "dumb Paddies" who easily succumbed to the degrading southern attitude toward labor and usually fell to a level that made their labor even less desirable than that of slaves. Olmsted's northern chauvinism came to the fore whenever he compared the quality of northern and southern laborers. Few northern employers would have recognized their employees from his description of them. Northern workers were almost invariably portrayed as highly motivated, diligent, self-propelled, and polite, even when being fired for some infraction of their normally high standards of behavior. There can be little doubt that Olmsted's jaundiced views of black relative to white labor, and of southern relative to northern labor, were influenced by the racial presuppositions that he brought with him on his travels through the South.

But to leave the matter there is to grossly oversimplify the issue. For whatever his prejudices, Olmsted was an extremely keen and diligent observer who was striving to discover those characteristics which distinguished the system of slave labor and which differentiated it from the system of free labor. While his prejudices undoubtedly predisposed him toward misinterpreting what he in fact observed, or had reported to him, it is not likely that he would have fallen into these errors if there had not been mitigating circumstances that made his misinterpretations plausible—if there had not been substantial elements which lent support, or at least appeared to lend support, to his conclusions.

The issue which probably confused Olmsted more than any other one came to the fore during his very first visit to a slave plantation—a wheat farm in Maryland which he examined on December 14, 1852. The slaves he saw there were not engaged in the fields but were at work in the neighborhood of the plantation buildings. The owner of the plantation told Olmsted that while he had employed white laborers on several occasions for digging ditches, he would not think of using whites "for common farm-labor, and made

light of their coming in competition with slaves. Negroes at hoeing and any steady field work, he assured me, would do two to their one. . . ."

Olmsted did not press the planter further. He clearly did not accept such a high appraisal of the quality of the planter's black labor force. Olmsted characterized the slaves on this farm as "stupid and dilatory in executing any orders given to them." "Those I saw at work," he said, "appeared to me to move very slowly and awkwardly, as did also those engaged in the stable."

This Maryland wheat plantation was not a run-down, piddling farm operated by a "mean white." It was, in Olmsted's words, a "fine farm," over two thousand acres in extent, run under "excellent management," with a main house which had "somewhat the look of an old French chateau," with "well-secured, wire fences," with a "nicely graveled and rolled" road, with "thoroughbred Shorthorns" as the milking stock ("I have seldom seen a better lot of milkers," said Olmsted), and with drains on the farm's lowlands that were so well built that they lasted "twenty years without failing." The planter's experiments with fertilizers so impressed Olmsted that he singled them out. How could so keen a planter, a man whose excellence in farm management had won him "a national reputation," have deceived himself so badly about the quality of his laborers? And how had he been able to prosper with workers who were "stupid and dilatory," who moved "very slowly" and who "must" have been "very difficult to direct efficiently?"

The mistake was Olmsted's. What he observed on this plantation was the easy-going rhythm of slaves during the winter interstice. The planting of winter wheat had been completed more than a month before Olmsted's arrival and the fall harvesting of other crops, such as corn, had also been completed well before his visit. This was a period for putting things in order—repairing fences, thoroughly cleaning stables, rerolling of roads—important tasks all, but not the type that called for intensive effort. The high-pressure tasks of planting, cultivating, and harvesting were either over, or not yet at hand. As we have previously stated, Olmsted's itinerary during his first trip kept him squarely in the interstice between harvesting and planting. As he moved south and westward into cotton country, he generally moved toward both later completion of the harvest and later resumption of the date of planting. By the time he arrived in Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana, states in which he might still have observed the picking of cotton in mid-December, he was already into February. He left Louisiana well before the onset of the new planting season, which began during the last days of March or early in April.

Thus, Olmsted's opinion of the typical work rhythms of slaves, an opinion in which he gained more and more confidence as he traveled through the "Seaboard States," was once again based on an unrepresentative sample of evidence. Olmsted appears to have made the mistake of assuming that the leisurely work pace of slaves during the southern agricultural interstice prevailed throughout the balance of the year. In his subsequent two trips, Olmsted did, of course, witness the typical rhythms of planting and cultivating.

But by then he had become so convinced that the pace he had observed during his first trip was the norm, that he invariably classified his later encounters with intense labor as exceptions.

Toward an Explanation for the Persistence of the Myth of Black Incompetence

The principal cause of the persistence of the myth of black incompetence in American historiography is racism. Perhaps no single history book written during the twentieth century has had a greater impact on the interpretation of slave life than U. B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery*. To point out that this volume was deeply marred by its author's adherence to the proposition that Negroes were racially inferior to whites would hardly evoke controversy among historians today. This point is now emphasized not only by the critics of Phillips but also his defenders.

How different the situation was when *American Negro Slavery* was published in 1918. Of the principal reviewers of the book, only two attacked Phillips's treatment of Negroes—and they were not in the mainstream of the historical profession as it was then constituted. One of these reviewers was W. E. B. Du Bois, the director of publicity and research for the N.A.A.C.P. and the editor of its journal, *Crisis*. Du Bois found *American Negro Slavery* "curiously incomplete and unfortunately biased."

The Negro as a responsible human being has no place in the book. To be sure individual Negroes are treated here and there but mainly as exceptional or as illustrative facts for purposes outside themselves. Nowhere is there any adequate conception of "darkies," "niggers" and "negroes" (words liberally used throughout the book) as making a living mass of humanity with all the usual human reactions. . . .

Mr. Phillips recurs again and again to this inborn character of Negroes: they are "submissive," "right-hearted" and "ingratiating" (p. 342), very "fond of display" (pp. 1, 291), with a "proneness to superstition" and "acceptance of subordination" (p. 291); "chaffing and chattering" (p. 292) with "humble nonchalance and a freedom from carking care" (p. 416). From the fourteenth to the twentieth century Mr. Phillips sees no essential change in these predominant characteristics of the mass of Negroes; and while he is finishing his book in a Y.M.C.A. army hut in the South all he sees in the Negro soldier is the "same easy-going amiable serio-comic obedience," and all he hears is the throwing of dice (pp. viii, ix). This Negro nature is, to Mr. Phillips, fixed and unchangeable. A generation of freedom has brought little change (p. ix). Even the few exceptional Negroes whom he mentions are of interest mainly because of their unexpected "ambition" and not for any especial accomplishment (p. 432). The fighting black maroons were overcome by "fright" (p. 466), and the Negroes' part in the public movements like the Revolution was "barely appreciable" (p. 116); indeed his main picture is of "inert Negroes, the majority of whom are as yet perhaps less efficient in freedom than their forbears were as slaves" (p. 396)!

Brilliant as it was, Du Bois's critique fell largely on deaf ears. It could

hardly have been otherwise during an era when the pseudoscientific racial theories which still dominated anthropology were widely accepted in scholarly circles. Indeed, more than two decades elapsed before scholars in the mainstream of the history profession began to press the theme enunciated by Du Bois.

While not unanticipated by others, the flag of general revolt against the Phillips school was raised by Richard Hofstadter in a 1944 paper entitled "U. B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend." Hofstadter attacked Phillips for exaggerating the paternalistic impulses of the planter, for painting too "rosy" a portrait of the material conditions of slave life, and for depicting the Negro as "a singularly contented and docile 'serio-comic' creature." The real nature of the treatment of slaves, said Hofstadter, was far more cruel than admitted by Phillips, slave health was much poorer than Phillips admitted, and slaves were more often left to the mercy of harsh overseers by their absentee owners than Phillips admitted. Hofstadter also charged Phillips with having underestimated the extent, and having distorted the nature of, "the slave's resistance to slavery." He chided Phillips for stressing a benign type of "give-and-take process between master and slave," for failing to appreciate "the extent to which the easement of the slave's condition came not from the master's benevolence but from the slave's resistance." Hofstadter ended his essay with a call for the rewriting of the history of slavery from the "viewpoint of modern cultural anthropology"; by this he meant the new view on race, pioneered by Franz Boas, which held that racial factors were unimportant in determining intellectual capacity.

Hofstadter's rebellion was far less sweeping than might appear. Hofstadter did not challenge Phillips on the general profitability and viability of slavery. Neither did he take issue with him on the quality of slave labor, on the economic efficiency of slavery, or on the effect of slavery on southern economic growth. Indeed, Hofstadter confined his attack to just four of the twenty-three chapters of *American Negro Slavery*, specifically excluding from consideration those which dealt with the issues of profitability, efficiency, and growth.

The limited nature of Hofstadter's attack on Phillips is not difficult to explain. Like so many others, Hofstadter's conception of slavery was developed largely from his reading of Olmsted. Hofstadter excoriated Phillips for not having made greater use of the work of this witness and critic. "Olmsted was not only an honest but an unusually acute observer," said Hofstadter, "and I believe that a fuller and more accurate knowledge of the late antebellum South can be obtained from the volumes of Olmsted than from Professor Phillips's own writings." But Phillips, despite his mistrust for the man, had read Olmsted with care and made great use of him. On the issues of the profitability and efficiency of slavery, as well as on the quality of slave labor and the effect of slavery on southern economic growth, Phillips was pure Olmsted. And on some of these issues Phillips merely paraphrased Olmsted. (Olmsted: "slaves thus get a fictitious value like stocks 'in a corner.'")

Phillips: "when the supply [of slaves] was 'cornered' it was unavoidable that the price should be bid up to the point of overvaluation.")

Despite Phillips's pretensions to a revolutionary break with James Ford Rhodes, the dominant historian in the interpretation of southern slavery at the time Phillips was a graduate student, and despite Hofstadter's claims to a revolutionary break with Phillips, all three men—and the schools of historical writing on the antebellum South which they symbolize—were adherents to what we have termed the "traditional interpretation" of the slave economy. That interpretation is the one which emerged from the economic indictment of slavery described in chapter 5. It consists of five main propositions. These are: 1, that slavery was generally an unprofitable investment, or depended on a trade in slaves to be profitable, except on new, highly fertile land; 2, that slavery was economically moribund; 3, that slave labor, and agricultural production based on slave labor, was economically inefficient; 4, that slavery caused the economy of the South to stagnate, or at least retarded its growth, during the antebellum era; 5, that slavery provided extremely harsh material conditions of life for the typical slave.

Phillips accepted all of these propositions except the last. When he claimed he was revolutionizing the interpretation of the antebellum South, he was referring only to point five, the harsh treatment of slaves, and to the shadow which that treatment cast on the character of slaveholders. Phillips did not have to overturn Rhodes on the character of blacks and the quality of their labor. Rhodes's views on the character of slaves and on the quality of their labor were fully congenial to Phillips. Rhodes described slaves as "indolent and filthy"; their expression was "besotted and generally repulsive"; on their "brute-like countenances . . . were painted stupidity, indolence, duplicity, and sensuality"; their labor was "stupid, plodding, machine-like"; licentiousness and indifference to chastity were "a natural inclination of the African race" which was further fostered by slavery; as women displayed "an entire lack of chastity," the men displayed "an entire lack of honesty"; and slave women yielded "without objection, except in isolated cases, to the passion of their master." In Rhodes's view the error of southern apologists was not in the claim that blacks were inferior, but in the manner in which they sought to cope with the problem created by this inferiority. "So long as Southern reasoners maintained that the negro race was inferior to the Caucasian, their basis was scientific truth, although their inference that this fact justified slavery was cruel as well as illogical."

The irony of Hofstadter's call for a rejection of the Phillips position on treatment, without a simultaneous attack on the other four points, is that it led in the direction of the re-establishment of the pre-Phillips or "pure" version of the traditional interpretation of the economics of slavery. As long as historians remained locked in combat on the issue of treatment, explicitly accepting all other aspects of the economic indictment of slavery, the myth of Negro incompetence continued to reign supreme—just as it had in the ante-

bellum era when critics of slavery and apologists debated over whether slavery had exacerbated or ameliorated the "natural" inferiority of blacks.

We do not mean that Hofstadter, or that scholars who responded to his call, aimed to re-establish the theories of the racial inferiority of Negroes as they existed in Rhodes or as in Clay, Helper, and Olmsted. Quite the contrary, as both Hofstadter and those who rallied to his banner have made clear, their aim was the unequivocal and complete rout of the racist myths that lingered on in the historiography of the antebellum South. What they failed to appreciate was that these racist myths drew sustenance not merely from one of the five points in the traditional interpretation of slavery but from each of them.

This was true even of Kenneth Stampp who . . . went further than any other post-Phillips scholar, except perhaps Lewis C. Gray, in rejecting the traditional interpretation of slavery. In *The Peculiar Institution*, Stampp argued that investments in slaves were quite generally profitable, indeed, highly profitable for most planters. He also rejected the contention that economic forces would by themselves have led to the demise of slavery, even in the upper South. Nor did Stampp find any evidence to support the claim that slavery prevented industrialization and economic growth. He pointed to "innumerable experiments" which "demonstrated that slaves could be employed profitably in factories," arguing that slaveholders preferred to operate in agriculture because, for the South, agriculture "seemed to be the surest avenue to financial success."

Stampp even expressed doubts about the fourth proposition in the traditional interpretation—that slavery was less efficient than an economic system based on free labor. "Slavery's economic critics overlooked the fact," he said, "that physical coercion, or the threat of it, proved to be a rather effective incentive, and that the system did not prevent masters from offering tempting rewards for the satisfactory performance of assigned tasks."

At this point, however, Stampp faltered. He hesitated to go on to the conclusion that slaves were equal to free men in the efficiency of their labor. He conceded that slave productivity was sharply reduced by "the slave's customary attitude of indifference toward his work, together with the numerous methods he devised to resist his enslavement." Stampp was able to hold on to his contention that slavery was profitable only by arguing that there were other "advantages" which "more than compensated for whatever superiority free labor had in efficiency." These "advantages" included longer hours of work, more complete exploitation of women and children, and lower real wages for slaves than for free men.

Why did Stampp, who broke with so much of the traditional interpretation and who came so close to rejecting the myth of the incompetence of slave labor, fail to do so? Why did he, as it were, pull back just as he seemed about to do so?

The answer lies in Stampp's preoccupation with the refutation of Phillips on point five, the nature of the treatment of slaves. Surely Phillips's

idyllic portrait needed correction. In reacting against the Rhodes treatment of plantations as houses of immorality and unmitigated terror run by men who were not only brutal but corrupt, Phillips substituted a near-paradise—at least as much of a paradise on earth as was reasonable to expect from a "primitive" race whose "savage" instincts had to be kept in check and which had to be trained to overcome a "natural ineptitude" and "indolence." In Phillips's reconstruction, planters emerged not merely as good men but, to use Du Bois's word, as supermen. Slavery became "less a business than a life." The objective of planters was not so much to make a profit as to make men.

Recoiling from such apologies, Stampp provided testimony that cruelty was indeed an ingrained feature of the treatment of slaves. The cases of cruelty which Phillips regarded as unusual, as outside the unwritten rules of the master class, emerged as a common pattern of white behavior in *The Peculiar Institution*. Cruelty, Stampp said, "was endemic in all slaveholding communities"; even those "who were concerned about the welfare of slaves found it difficult to draw a sharp line between acts of cruelty and such measures of physical force as were an inextricable part of slavery." For Stampp, cruelty arose not because of the malevolent nature of the slaveholders but because of the malevolent nature of the system—because a master could brook nothing less from his slave than "perfect" submission. To achieve that goal masters were impelled, regardless of their humanity in other respects, to develop in the Negro "a paralyzing fear of white men," to "impress upon him his innate inferiority," and to "instill in him a sense of complete dependence." While Stampp did not employ the concentration camp analogy later set forth by Stanley Elkins, his plantation strongly suggested a prison with cruel wardens.

From this point the argument could have gone—and did in fact go—in two directions. One was the direction taken by Elkins, who argued that a system as cruel as the one described by Stampp must have had a devastating impact on the personality of slaves. No one could live under so brutal a regime without succumbing to it. Negroes were not supermen, any more than were the Jews in Hitler's concentration camps. Although plantations were not concentration camps, the masters who ran the plantations had as much absolute power over slaves as Hitler's gaulers had over the Jews, and as much determination to crush their spirit. What emerged from the process was "Sambo, the typical plantation slave . . . docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing." Sambo's "behavior was full of infantile silliness" and his "relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment."

Stampp decided to move in a direction that, on the surface, appears quite different from the one Elkins chose. He argued that slaves did not succumb; they resisted. Resistance did not generally take the form of revolution or strikes. Such open forms of resistance were sheer suicide. There were no rebellions among U.S. slaves comparable to those in Jamaica or Brazil;

there was no protracted guerilla warfare. Resistance in the U.S. took a much more subtle form; it came in guises so innocent that masters and overseers failed even to recognize it. The participants in this resistance movement "were the meek, smiling ones whom many thought were contented though irresponsible."

They were not reckless rebels who risked their lives for freedom; if the thought of rebellion crossed their minds, the odds against success seemed too overwhelming to attempt it. But the inevitability of their bondage made it none the more attractive. And so, when they could, they protested by shirking their duties, injuring the crops, feigning illness, and disrupting the routine. These acts were, in part, an unspectacular kind of "day to day resistance to slavery."

What, of course, is common to both Stamp and Elkins is agreement on the characteristic of slave behavior: slaves lie, steal, feign illness, behave childishly, and shirk their duties. Indeed, this characterization has been one of the enduring constants in the literature on slavery. By whatever path they moved, writers on slavery usually returned to the theme of the inferiority of slave labor. To Olmsted, Rhodes, and Phillips the inferiority was due to racial factors. To Caines, inferiority was sociological in origin. To Elkins, the cause was psychological. To Stamp, the inferiority was due to "day to day resistance." Paradoxically, it was the slaveholders who were least inhibited in acknowledging that blacks were better workers than whites, although they attributed this superiority to themselves rather than to their bondsmen.

Stamp hesitated to make the leap required to recognize the superior quality of slave labor because he remained too enmeshed in the debate between the critics of slavery and the apologists, and he overestimated the cruelty of the slave system. The logic of his position made it difficult to acknowledge that ordinary slaves could be diligent workers, imbued like their masters with a Protestant ethic, or that, even though they longed for freedom, slaves could strive to develop and improve themselves in the only way that was open to them.